

Medical team conducts mission in Ecuador

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7/27/2006 - ESMERELDAS, Ecuador (AFPN) -- A medical team is conducting the first Medical Readiness Training Exercise, or MEDRETE, held in Esmeraldas, Ecuador, through July 28.

The two surgeons, a nurse anesthetist, two medical technicians and an anesthesiologist are led by Maj. (Dr.) Matthew Talarczyk, 859th Surgical Operations Squadron plastic surgeon at Wilford Hall Medical Center. The team is slated to perform more than 37 operations, primarily cleft lips and cleft palates, at an Ecuadorian naval hospital in Esmeraldas, a province in the northwest part of the country.

MEDRETE provides Air Force medical units with deployment training, improving U.S. capabilities to conduct unilateral or combined operations in theater. By maintaining a U.S. presence to support regional stability, and conducting humanitarian and civic assistance in conjunction with military operations, the program enhances the image of the United States.

"It is very important we are here ... it is important that we help our brothers and sisters who don't have the same resources that we do in the U.S.," said Maj. Flavia Casassola, Wilford Hall Surgery Center Flight commander and nurse anesthetist.

"The first thing we had to complete was screening about 90 patients. Of those 90 we were able to select around 37 who were good surgical candidates," said Col. (Dr.) Charles Hardin, a Wilford Hall surgeon.

Colonel Hardin and Major Talarczyk arrived on July 14 to begin screening patients who had come from all over Ecuador seeking medical attention.

"The criteria for patient selection focused on cleft lip and cleft palate patients and we included congenital and acquired malformations, such as burn victims," said Major Talarczyk.

The rest of the team arrived July 16 and organized supplies from Wilford Hall in the Ecuadorian hospital. The team unpacked nearly 1,500 pounds of supplies and equipment to conduct operations on the Ecuadorian patients before performing any surgeries, said Master Sgt. Darlena Mathis, 59th Surgical Operations Group Operating Room NCO in charge of staffing and scheduling.

"The equipment here is modern, clean and similar to ours, just a little different," Major Casassola said. "We purposely scheduled our smaller cases to better acclimate ourselves to this facility."

"For this operation we only brought relatively simple instruments," Colonel Hardin said. "That's part of the beauty of this whole trip. The things we do are very simple, but the effect is very large and very long-lasting."

The first day of surgeries included lip repair on a 1-year-old girl, a scar revision on a 29-year-old, and cyst removal on a 15-year-old.

"When you see kids with the kinds of problems that the doctors are operating on, and to know we are making a change?it indirectly combats many problems here in the area," said Army Maj. Keith Anthony, Security Assistance Command counter-narcotics advisor.

Major Anthony, who is under the operational control of the U.S. MilGroup in Ecuador, served as a liaison for the team in Esmeraldas.

"The MilGroup has been fantastic working with us. Anytime you take a few tons of medical supplies and eight people, it takes great support to move them into a fairly remote area like Esmeraldas," Colonel Hardin said.

Esmeraldas has a population of nearly 100,000 and is a port city where fishing and petroleum exports play a major role in the infrastructure of the economy, Major Anthony said.

"The key hospital personnel, commanding Ecuadorian admiral and the citizens of Esmeraldas have gone to great lengths to make us feel at home. It has been a wonderful experience being welcomed in such a fashion," said Major Talarczyk.

Working with limited capabilities and seeing a high volume of medical cases fulfills many of the MEDRETE objectives for the team, including improved combat readiness.

"I've been on eight missions. On these types of missions, you are limited with time you can spend here and you also have to get things done faster. It absolutely prepares you for working in wartime operations," Sergeant Mathis said.

So far, the team has faced obstacles such as performing operations in hot and humid weather conditions and working through language barriers with the patients and their families. The success they achieved in working through these problems is due in part to the team's experience with humanitarian missions in South America.

"The entire team was excited to have another opportunity to work with Colonel Hardin. This is his 18th humanitarian mission, and we are so lucky to have him here with us," Major Talarczyk said.

The team is slated to finish all operations July 28 and return to Wilford Hall, better prepared to provide combat healthcare in deployed environments.

"Coming here, we learn to adapt with the resources, just like the surgeons in (Iraq) have to adapt," the major said. "This experience teaches us how to be more flexible and efficient."

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